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THE ORIGIN AND CREDIBILITY OF THE ICELANDIC SAGA¹

THERE is probably no literary production of the Middle Ages which makes such an impression upon the modern reader as the Icelandic saga. It is true that the saga breathes the cooling breath of times long since gone by, that it tells of people whose thoughts and whose conceptions of honor and of duty differed from ours. The art of the saga, however, is modern, realistic. Its men and women stand before us as if in flesh and blood, as they love and hate, as they live and die. We hear the words they utter, curt, blunt, sharp as a sword, full of pithy humor. We are carried away by the dramatic action.

The saga presents no analysis of conditions of soul, contains no moralizing observations; it is sober and realistic. Conciseness of style and composition is its chief characteristic. The unimportant is never carried into detail—is often barely touched upon. Here the saga fundamentally differs in effect from the moralizing and wordy prose of medieval Latin. What a difference between Snorre and the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, even when both are recounting the same story!

The style of the saga is marked by art and in part even by a very refined art. It has been formed through oral recitation: art has developed nature. The speech of the ancient Norsemen was in fact similar to the language of the saga. *Gens breviloqua et veridica*, the Icelanders are called by Giraldus Cambrensis. In 1170 Dublin, until then the capital of a northern Viking kingdom, was sacked by the English. The king, Haskulf, took flight, but later returned with a fleet. After an heroic encounter he was captured and was asked whether he wished to be ransomed. He answered proudly: "We came this time with a small company and have just made a beginning. If my life is spared we shall soon come with another and much greater host." After this speech he was beheaded.

The sagas contain, however, many lifeless passages, for instance, the long and detailed genealogies. It is true that genealogies played

¹ A paper read (in German) at the International Congress of the Historical Sciences at Berlin, August, 1908, by Professor Alexander Bugge of the University of Christiania.

an important part in old Icelandic life, and that every chieftain had to know the names of his ancestors. It is therefore possible that even in the orally narrated sagas genealogies did occur. But the learned saga-writers have, no doubt, further developed this habit, perhaps through the influence of the Biblical genealogies. Even in the best sagas, as for instance, the *Njála*, the great number of personages and the various parallel lines of action become almost oppressive. This is accounted for by the fact that several originally independent short narratives are blended into a single whole.

But how, where and when did the saga have its origin? All the northern people were accustomed to tell stories (*sagen*).² We find the same Viking stories told by English and Norman, as well as by Russian historians, as for example, the story of the city which was set afire by sparrows, with nut-shells bound under their wings. The Varangians in Russia had perhaps an incipient oral saganarrative, as we may conclude from Nestor's chronicle. The Grand Duke Oleg³ sailed in the year 907 towards Constantinople and came to the Sound,⁴ as Nestor, using a Norse loan-word, calls the Bosphorus. The emperor was forced to conclude peace. Oleg said: "Sew sails of silk for the Russians and sails of linen for the Slavs!" He fastened his shield as a token of victory upon the city-gate and sailed away. The Russians spread their silken sails, the Slavs their linen ones. The wind rent the former and the Slavs said: "Let us keep our sail-cloth; silk sails are not suitable for Slavs."

The Swedish runic inscription of Rök (of the ninth century), which may be called a library in stone, mentions not only ancient songs but also stories, which appear to have had an unmistakable similarity with the legendary hero-saga, the *fornaldarsaga*. The saga of the Viking chief, mentioned on many Swedish rune-stones, Ingvarr Viðforli, who lived in the first half of the eleventh century, is declared in the saga itself to have been heard by an Icelandic merchant at the court of the king of Sweden and by him brought to Iceland. It may be, therefore, that the Swedes knew sagas orally narrated; written sagas, however, they did not have. The *Guta Saga* (History of the Gotlanders), composed about 1300, on the island of Gotland, stands quite alone but has the same characteristics as the Icelandic saga, with little verses interspersed. Perhaps, however, the *Guta Saga* had its origin under foreign influences.

² I need not emphasize here the difference between *saga* and *sage*. [In this translation the word *story* has been used for *sage*.]

³ Oleg, i. e., Old Norse Helgi.

⁴ The word *Sund* is used only two or three times by Nestor and always in cases where he is treating expeditions of the Swedish conquerors of Russia (the "Russ") to Byzantium.

The Gotlanders indeed were, as merchants, acquainted with all northern and western Europe. In Denmark hardly as much advancement was made as in Sweden.

The saga belongs to the Norwegian and to the Icelandic people. Stories and legends have been narrated among the Norsemen since the earliest times. The Icelandic *Landnámabók* (the Book of the Settling of Iceland) contains stories which must date from the first period of Iceland's settlement.⁵ Even in very early times different stories were often loosely joined together. Seamen who sailed along the coast of Norway contributed much toward spreading these stories and connecting them together.⁶ Similar stories live on until this day in the Norwegian valleys, especially in the secluded Sætersdalen (in southern Norway).⁷ They are dramatic, are frequently told with genuine art and even contain scattered bits of verse. A real saga, however, has never been created in the Norwegian valleys.

We learn how stories of that kind originate, from the *Fóstbræðrasaga* (Saga of the Foster-brothers). The poet Þormóðr is lying at midday alone in a booth at the assembly of the Greenlanders. Someone comes and says: "You are losing great pleasure. I was at the booth of Þorgrímr Einarsson. He was relating a saga. The men are sitting around him and listening." Þormóðr asks: "Can you give me the name of any person in the narrative?" The other answers: "Þorgeirr was a great hero in the story. Þorgrímr also had something to do with it. He defended himself manfully as might be expected." Þormóðr understands that Þorgrímr is relating how he killed Þormóðr's foster-brother. He takes his axe, slays the narrator and makes his escape. This narrative is indeed called a saga, but this word in Icelandic signifies any kind of narrative. That related by Þorgrímr Einarsson was not yet a real saga. Even where several stories are joined together we have as yet no saga. There is still lacking that which makes the individual narratives into the artistically completed whole which we call a saga.

The *märchen* and not the story (*sage*) is the mother of the saga. The style, the humor of the saga is borrowed from the *märchen*. The story (*sage*) treats only a single episode in the life of the hero.

⁵ E. g., the story of Hjorleifr who was killed by his Irish slaves. The latter to preserve their own lives knead meal and butter together and call it *minnþak*, a genuine Irish word occurring with the same meaning in the *Lex Adamnani*. Iceland was found by Norwegians about the years 860-870, and was settled from Norway during the next fifty or sixty years.

⁶ Cf. Axel Olrik, *Kilderne til Saxos Historie*, II. 280 ff., and *Landnámabók* (*Íslendinga Sögur*, I. 326), where a Norwegian merchant, sailing on a ship along the western coast of Norway, tells the story of King Vatnar and his grave-mound.

⁷ The stories of Sætersdalen have been collected by Johannes Skar, *Gamalt or Sætesdal*, I.-III.

The fairy-tale (*märchen*) and the saga, however, narrate the whole life of the hero in a series of episodes. The *märchen* is dramatic; its language is curt and blunt, just like the saga. All *märchen* and all sagas resemble each other, without being all equally well narrated. *Märchen* have been told by the Norwegians from the time that they settled in the Scandinavian peninsula. The saga narrators could likewise recount *märchen*. The sagas related at an Icelandic wedding in 1117 were regarded as *märchen* by the contemporaries; they were fictitious sagas, so-called *lygi-sögur*. Odd the Monk, the oldest biographer of Olaf Tryggvason, says in the introduction to his work, "It is better to hear this than the step-mother tales the herdsmen tell." The word *soga* means in Norwegian dialects not only narrative but likewise *märchen*.

Many sagas, especially those parts of them which treat of the hero's youth, are entirely or partially built upon *märchen*. The tale of the later Faroese chief Sigmundr Brestason, who comes as a boy to a lonely Norwegian farm, and is hidden by the wife when the farmer comes home and smells the stranger, is nothing but the *märchen* of the Boy at the Giant's Court. The *märchen* of Aschenbrödel, who lies idle by the fire, but suddenly rises, bathes, combs and trims his hair, seizes weapons, becomes a great warrior, and finally gains the kingdom and the princess, was a story in great favor with the old Norwegians and Icelanders. Sagas like the *Svarfdælasaga* and the early history of Harald the Fairhaired, who unified Norway, are to a great extent built upon this tale.

The account, as told by Odd the Monk, of the childhood of the Norwegian chief Olaf Tryggvason (d. 1000), who with his mother had to flee from the evil queen Gunhild, is nothing but an ordinary *märchen*-motive. Olaf, like the heroes of the *märchen*, comes among strangers early in life. His royal descent is discovered by a miracle. Sorcerers had prophesied that a young man had come to Russia, from whose *hamingja* (guardian spirit) a light would spread over the whole of eastern Europe. The wise queen of Novgorod hears of this and the king on her prayer calls together a general assembly. On the third day the queen comes upon a young boy in ragged clothing, his hat pulled down over his eyes. She looks into his eyes and sees that he is the right one. Olaf is brought to the king and his royal origin is made known. This story is composed after the *märchen* of the Youth with the Golden Hair, who hides his hair under a big hat, feigning to be unclean. The light over Olaf's *hamingja* and the general assembly originate in another *märchen*. In Brittany the story runs thus: Rome is without a pope. For three days a procession goes through the country

with burning candles. On the third day a guileless boy, Innocent, joins the procession, holding a willow rod. The birds in a willow tree have prophesied to him his future greatness. A flame kindles itself on the point of the rod. Innocent is made pope. In another version of the story, the light kindles on the young man's head.⁸

The earliest sagas now known were written down in the second half of the twelfth century and in the course of the thirteenth, and those recording the lives of the Norwegian kings, especially of Olaf Tryggvason and of St. Olaf, were probably written down before the family sagas. The oral saga, the saga that was only narrated, and not written down, is however much older. Already at the above-mentioned wedding in 1117, sagas were narrated.⁹ The Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus (twelfth century) knew a number of hero-sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) of Norwegian or Icelandic origin. In the second half of the eleventh century we meet with a succession of Icelanders who bear the honorary epithet *fróði*, that is, "learned in sagas, or in history". Many of these were the authorities for Ari Fróði and the *Landnámabók*. These "anti-quaries" were similar to the Irish *senchaidi*. Besides the saga-men there were also in Iceland professional scalds just as in Ireland there were *fled* or scalds, besides *senchaidi* or "antiquaries".

Earlier, however, than in Norway or Iceland the saga developed in the Viking settlements on the British Isles. The first saga to arise concerning a Norwegian king was the Saga of Olaf Tryggvason, who fell in the year 1000. Its basis is old tradition and not, as in the case of the lives of his predecessors, as they are found in Snorre's *Heimskringla*, contemporaneous scaldic poems used by learned saga-men in writing the histories. A saga of Olaf Tryggvason, however, was narrated in the eleventh century, not only in Norway but also in England. Olaf came thither in 991, as leader of the Vikings, compelled the English for the first time to pay "danegeld", was baptized and concluded peace with King Æthelred. Odd the Monk, who lived in the second half of the twelfth century, mentions a saga of King Olaf narrated in England about 1060. His authority was a native of the Orkney Islands.¹⁰ In Britain Olaf

⁸ My colleague, Professor Moltke Moe, who has had the kindness to go over this lecture with me and whose extraordinary knowledge has been of great advantage to me, has called my attention to this *märchen* of the Bird of Good Luck, originating from Byzantium. Cf. the exposition of Professor Moe in Helland, *Norges Land og Folk, Finmarkens Amt*, II. 397-403, explaining the Finnish fairy-tale of the Bird of Luck.

⁹ I do not here mention the historian Ari Fróði (1067-1118), the father of Icelandic history, whose work (*Islendingabók* or *Libellus Islandorum*) bears a closer resemblance to annalistic writings than to the sagas.

¹⁰ This authority is not mentioned by Odd himself, but only in the *Flateyjarbók* and in the great Olaf's saga, but the tradition goes back to Odd.

Tryggvason was confounded with another Olaf, the famous Viking chieftain and king of Northumberland who is known by the Celtic surname Cuarán (Shoe). This Olaf, who fought at Brunanburh in 937, and afterwards became king of Dublin and died as a pilgrim on the sacred island of Iona in 981, is commonly regarded as the prototype of the hero of the famous medieval tale of Havelok the Dane. But the story of Olaf Cuarán does not coincide with that of Havelok. The saga of Havelok, known in French as well as in English versions, is the story of Olaf Tryggvason, only remodelled into the form of a *märchen*. The tale of Havelok sprang from the British saga of Olaf in Norman times. Olaf Tryggvason is frequently called Havelok in the Middle English rhyming chronicles.¹¹ The real Olaf Cuarán, in the same chronicle which contains the saga of Havelok (in Gaimar), is called, not Havelok, but Anlaf Cuiran. The only time that the name Cuarán appears in an Irish chronicle (the *Leabhar Oiris*), it is used for a warrior who fought in the battle of Clontarf (1014).

Arthur conquers Denmark. Havelok's father, Gunter, king of that country, loses his life by treachery. The traitor Odulf is made an under-king under Arthur. The faithful Grim flees with the young Havelok and his mother. They are assailed by pirates. The mother is slain. Grim lands in eastern England. Around his hut a town rises, which is called after him, Grimsby. When Havelok grows up, his foster-parents are no longer able to keep him. He comes to King Edelsi of Lincoln, becomes a kitchen-boy and helps to carry water and wood. Edelsi has a niece, Argentele, daughter of the late king of Norfolk. He marries her to Havelok to disinherit her. The first night after they are married, Argentele dreams that the wild beasts of the forest pay homage to her husband and she sees a flame of fire coming from his mouth. She tells a pious hermit of this. He prophesies that Havelok will become king. Havelok learns of his royal descent and sails with his wife to Denmark. One of his father's faithful servants recognizes him by the flame, the traitor Odulf is killed and Havelok is made king. Later, at his wife's entreaty, he returns to England. In the English poem his army is represented as a foreign Viking host which slays priests and burns churches. King Edelsi is forced to surrender Norfolk and soon thereafter dies. Argentele and Havelok inherit Lincoln and live in splendor and happiness.

King Tryggve, the father of Olaf Tryggvason, was likewise slain through treachery. The traitor Hakon, jarl of Lade, who in the saga, incited by Queen Gunhild, persecutes Olaf and his mother

¹¹ Cf. Ward, *Catalogue of Romances in the British Museum*.

Astrid, became an under-king under the king of Denmark, Harald Gormsson, who conquered Norway. Astrid, the widow of Tryggve, accompanied by a faithful servant, flees with her son to Russia. On the way they are seized by pirates; mother and son are separated. How Olaf's royal descent was discovered in Novgorod, we have already heard.

The light of Olaf's *hamingja* corresponds to the flame from Havelok's mouth. Olaf marries a Wendish, and afterwards an Irish and a Danish princess. These and the Russian queen are blended in Argentele. Later Olaf goes to England. In the Scilly Isles he visits a pious hermit who prophesies that he will be a king. He comes to Norway, the traitor Jarl Hakon is slain and he himself is made king.¹²

The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill is the name of an Irish work of the end of the eleventh century, telling of the wars between the Vikings and the Irish, and especially of the king of Munster, Brian Borumha, and the great battle of Clontarf in 1014.¹³ Among the sources for the history of this battle, the "historians of the Northlanders" (*senchaidi Gall*), are mentioned. My father, the late Sophus Bugge, has shown that a saga of King Brian and the battle of Clontarf was told orally by the Norsemen of Dublin in their own language, and perhaps even written down.¹⁴

This "Viking saga" has many features characteristic of the Icelandic saga. A peculiarity which we only meet in the saga of the Battle of Clontarf and in that of the Battle of Svolder (A. D. 1000), as well as in the story of the Battle of Braavalla, which has been modelled after the two above-mentioned tales, is that the names of the combatants are arranged in alliterative lines. The Icelandic saga grew up under the influence of the Viking saga and through this it is influenced also by the Celtic prose-narrative. In Ireland as in Wales heroic tales had from primitive times the form of prose narrative, while with the Germanic people their form was that of the poem. The Irish moreover had historical sagas; indeed the saga-narrators could even produce their own experiences in artistic prose. The poet Erard MacCoisi (at the end of the tenth century) comes disguised to the court of King Domnall, whose people had burned

¹² I discuss the entire question of the origin of the Havelok saga more fully in an article to be printed in the *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed*.

¹³ *The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* (*Logadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*), ed. by Todd, *Rerum Brit. Medii Aevi Scriptores* (London, 1867), cannot possibly, as Todd, the editor, thought, have been written immediately after the battle of Clontarf. The chronicle contains too many untruths, and *märchen* play too prominent a part in it. It was probably written at the end of the eleventh century.

¹⁴ S. Bugge, *Norsk Sagafortælling og Sagaskrivning i Irland* (published by the *Norsk Historisk Tidsskrift*).

his possessions and carried away his cattle. The king asks him what tales he has in his memory. The poet names one hundred and forty-nine different titles. He finally, by the only one which is unknown to the king, awakens the latter's curiosity. MacCoisi was concealing under this title the story of the injustice which had befallen him. All the narratives named by him had the form of prose, occasionally interspersed with verses, and should be called sagas.¹⁵

The Irish saga is a child of the country and of the people among whom it grew up. The continually changing tones and varied colors of the sky, the dark forests with their luxuriant underbrush, the blooming hedges of red thorn, white thorn, privet and fuchsia, which grows in southern Ireland to large trees; the still forest lakes in whose blackish-brown waters the beech-trees and the larches are reflected; the heather which clothes in pink the hillsides—all these give to nature in Ireland a peculiar, dreamy, even fanciful imprint, as in no other country of Europe. Like nature so the Irish people, a thousand years ago, were dreamy and fanciful, but at the same time wild and excitable, having the traits of a nature-people and yet also such as suggest the highest intellectual culture. The Irish hero-saga is wild and unrestrained, often tragic and deeply impressive, sometimes melancholy or elegiac; full of the finest nature-poetry. The tragic tale of the sons of Usnech or the tale of Ronan who murders his son (Fingal Ronain), is sure to move the reader with its wild pathos, as will the story of the children of Lir with its deep melancholy.

On the great inhospitable island covered with mountains and with ice, and in the midst of the ocean, there was no place for fancy or for dreamy melancholy. There people in the struggle for life grew to be cool men of sense, maintaining their rights and never allowing themselves to be carried away by their feelings. Like the people, so the Icelandic saga too is calm, exact and under control, its language clear and concise. The language of the Irish saga, on the contrary, is often diffuse and obscure (though not in the best specimens), and artistic moderation is foreign to it. Yet there is after all an unmistakable similarity between the Irish and the Icelandic saga. Both have a foothold in history; both begin by giving the hero's ancestry and early life, and verses are introduced in both to serve as historical proofs.

The Viking saga has left a lasting impress upon the Irish saga. Middle Irish prose literature is full of Scandinavian loan-words.

¹⁵ This story is found in the *Book of Leinster* (twelfth century) and is published by H. Zimmer in the *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen*.

The above-mentioned work, *The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, at its beginning, where the early life of Brian is told, appears like an Irish chronicle of the usual type. With the story of the battle of Clontarf, the work assumes a completely altered character. The chronicle becomes a saga. The dramatic episodes however are borrowed from the Norse saga of Brian, as it was told in Dublin.

To indicate the Irish influence upon the Viking saga, and thereby upon the Icelandic saga, is not easy. The prose narrative as a species of artistic composition was primitive among the Irish, but not among the Norwegians. The Irish saga opened the eyes of the Norsemen, and, so to speak, set free the saga. Certain types and motives moreover are of Irish origin. The gallery of women in Celtic poetry is a remarkably rich one. Even Shakespeare has his Lady Macbeth and Cordelia of Celtic extraction. In the Icelandic saga, on the other hand, the men are more interesting. The most characteristic women are those who know no difference between good and evil, who attract men irresistibly by their unfading beauty, who by their vain and unbounded passion for revenge bring death and destruction upon friends as well as foes, but who themselves unharmed live on to a great age. To this type belong Hallgerd of *Njal's Saga* and Gudrun of the *Laxdæla*. They are related to the Brynhild of the Eddic songs. Their prototype, however, is the Irish queen Gormflaith,¹⁶ whose deadly hatred toward her former husband, Brian, brings on the battle of Clontarf, where, to win her, kings and chieftains lose their lives. Gormflaith or Kormfløð was well known in Iceland. The *Njála*, whose heroine Hallgerd is, gives an excellent characterization of her. Other female figures of the Icelandic saga likewise appear to be influenced by the women of Irish poetry; for example, the fair Helga, the beloved of Gunnlaug Snake-tongue, bears unmistakable likeness to Derdriu, the loved one of Noisi, son of Usnech.

Of the men in the sagas, only the scalds resemble the Irish type. In their veins indeed there was often Celtic blood. The scald Kormak, for instance, the Icelandic Catullus, has an Irish name; his eyes are dark, his hair black and curled, his wit and his hot-blooded nature remind one more of the Celt than of the Scandinavian. The saga of the scald whose poems possess magic power¹⁷ is borrowed from Irish literature. The Icelander Þorleifr desires to take vengeance on Hakon, the mighty jarl of Lade.¹⁸ He comes

¹⁶ Queen Gormflaith was married three times: (1) to Maelsechlainn, king of Tara and supreme king of all Ireland, (2) to Olaf Cuarán, king of Dublin, by whom she had a son, Sitric, king of Dublin, (3) to Brian Borumha.

¹⁷ The *Þattr* of Þorleifr Jarlaskald, a continuation of the *Svarfdælasaga*.

¹⁸ Hakon ruled Norway from 965 to 995. His ancestors were hereditary earls of the northern part of the country.

to the latter's hall in disguise and recites a poem called *Þokuvísur* or "mist-song". The hall becomes dark in consequence; weapons move of themselves, and kill many men; the jarl falls sick, his beard and hair drop off. The Irish have always believed in the power of the satirical poem. Through this came "storms of every darkness", as is said in "The Colloquy of the Two Sages".¹⁹ The poet Athirne composed satirical poems against the inhabitants of Leinster so that neither grain nor grass nor leaves would grow.

In certain other episodes Irish influence can likewise be traced. A favorite motive in the sagas is the so-called *mannjafnaðr* (comparison between men). Most famous is the colloquy between the two kings of Norway, Eystein and Sigurd the Jerusalem-farer (ca. 1120), where each of the kings puts forth his claims to fame and declares what good he has done. This colloquy is not history but fiction, and formed under influence from Ireland, where similar comparisons play a great part in the heroic tales. In the *Ljósvetningasaga* there is a contention about precedence between two women that reminds the reader of the famous Irish tale "The Festival of Bríceriu". Adam of Bremen relates that Olaf Trygvason undertook at his wife's request the expedition in which he fell at Svolder in the year 1000. This episode has been recast by Snorre into a dramatic scene which is borrowed from Brian's saga. King Olaf comes one day with a present for his wife. She pushes it aside, however, and reproaches her husband severely as not daring to march through the realm of her brother, the king of Denmark, while her own father had conquered Norway. Olaf replies in anger: "I shall never be afraid of your brother. In case we meet he will get the worst of it!" He collects a fleet, sails through Öresund and falls at Svolder.

The battle of Clontarf is brought on by a similar episode. The king of Leinster, Maelmordha, comes to pay tribute to Brian. His sister Gormflaith has separated from Brian but is still living at his court. Maelmordha asks her to sew a silver button on his coat. She however throws the cloak into the fire and harshly reproaches her brother for being willing to pay a tax which neither his father nor his grandfather have given. Incited by his sister, Maelmordha severs relations with Brian, collects the latter's enemies and falls at Clontarf. It is only through such scenes that it is possible to indicate the force of Irish influence.²⁰

¹⁹ *Immacallam in dá Thuarad*, ed. by Whitley Stokes in the *Revue Celtique*, 1907.

²⁰ One of the most important Norwegian literary works of the Middle Ages is the so-called "Kings' Mirror" (*Speculum Regale* or *Konungs skuggsjá*). In

In the Norse settlements on the British Isles the saga-narrative flourished universally in the eleventh century, notably at the king's court in Dublin, where Irish and Norse scalds recited their elaborated poems.²¹ In the twelfth century sagas were still narrated in Dublin, for instance, that of the Norwegian king Magnus Barefoot, who fell in 1103 in Ulster and who is so prominent in Irish saga tradition.²² Is it too much to assume that people had also an oral saga-tale concerning the heroic death of the last king of Dublin and his companion, John the Furious, who clove a Norman knight in two with a single sword-stroke? Cumberland, where a mixed Norwegian-Cymric civilization developed²³ and where Norse runic inscriptions from the middle of the twelfth century have been found, is the home of the Havelok saga. The Viking saga of the Danish king Rolf Kraki and his heroes grew up in Northumberland or Lincolnshire out of old hero-songs, under the influence of the paladins of Charlemagne and Arthur. One of the heroes of King Rolf, the Norwegian, Boðvar Biarki, the Bear's Son, is mentioned in several writings from eastern England, and in them reference particularly is made to *fabulae Danorum* (Norse tales).²⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth has made one of the paladins of Arthur out of this Boðvar (Beduerus, Bedivere).

The Viking saga exercised enduring influence upon the English literature of the Middle Ages. Geoffroy of Monmouth, whose *Historia Regum Britanniae* is full of Viking stories, knew for example the above-mentioned saga of Brian. Brennius wishes to shake off the authority of his brother, Belinus, and sues for the hand of a daughter of the king of Norway. With the princess and a great host of Norwegians he returns to Britain. They are attacked on the way by the Danish king Guichtlacus, whom the Norwegian princess has long loved. A violent storm comes on, the fleets are scattered, and Guichtlacus lands with his beloved in Northumberland. This tale has been compared with the story of Helgi and his one of its parts it narrates the wonders of Ireland. Dr. Kuno Meyer has recently shown (*Eriu*, 1908) that these stories about Ireland are not founded upon written sources, but upon oral narratives. This proves that stories and tales during the early Middle Ages really migrated from Ireland and Norway.

²¹ Of Icelandic scalds at the king's court in Dublin, I name only Gunnlaug Snake-tongue and Þorsteinn Orraskald, the court poet of Olaf Cuarán. Irish tales, *e. g.*, of the poet Ruman, tell of Irish scalds who appeared in Dublin.

²² In several Ossianic hero-songs as well as in Irish and Gaelic stories, King Magnus plays an important part. The sea is still called *bothar Manuis*, the road of Magnus. Among the Ostmen of Ireland the Norse language was still spoken at the middle of the thirteenth century.

²³ Cf. the famous cross of Gorforth, with carvings from the Norse mythology.

²⁴ See the narrative of the Anglo-Saxon national hero Hereward, in which several Norse scenes appear (*cf.* Deutschbein). Axel Olrik calls attention to another Northumbrian saga, that of Earl Siward the Fat.

love Sigrun in the Eddic songs,²⁵ and the Helgi saga in turn is conjectured to have been influenced by the saga of Brian.²⁶ The armies of Brennius and Belinus meet in the wood near Calaterium and fierce is the conflict. "The ranks fell like oats under the reaper's hand", says Geoffrey.²⁷ The Norwegians take flight to their ships; Belinus makes his escape to Gaul. There exists, however, no seaport Calaterium. The whole story is modelled on the narrative of the Battle of Clontarf. Here, too, the battle was fought in a forest outside of Dublin. The Irish saga relates that the "ranks fell as when a great host are reaping a field of oats". At the close of the day the Norwegians fled to their ships. The Irish tale at this point shows its origin from the Norse saga of Brian, for it is said to have been the spectators on the walls of Dublin who made this remark.

The Icelanders became acquainted with the Viking saga in part directly, through their relations with Ireland, and in part indirectly, by way of the Orkney Islands. There was rich literary activity on the Orkneys in the twelfth century. The most noted name about the middle of the century was Jarl Rognvaldr Kali, and about 1200, Bishop Biarni Kolbeinsson. Not poetry alone, but the saga flourished here. According to the view of several scholars Bishop Biarni was the author of the saga of the jarls of Orkney (*Jarlasaga*). At any rate, the life of St. Magnus, the Orkney jarl, was written there. It was through a man from the Orkney Islands, as we intimated above, that the Icelanders came to know the British saga of Olaf Tryggvason.

Narrative tales had been related in Iceland since the time of its settlement, but now came knowledge of the saga on the British Isles—like a mental emancipation. Christianity was introduced; the times were more peaceful. Great deeds were now no longer done; men simply told about them. Legal proceedings had come instead of feuds. In such a period the saga could have its rise.

Richard Heinzel, who was the first to attempt a scientific investigation of the spirit of the saga, calls the sagas "historical romances". Finnur Jonsson (in his history of Icelandic literature) constantly emphasizes their historical value. They are, however, neither romances nor histories, but, as the name indicates, *sögur* (narrations), artistic reproductions of tradition. The historical and unhistorical are indissolubly blended. Some sagas are more, and some less, historical. A saga like that of Gunnlaug Snakes-

²⁵ Deutschbein.

²⁶ Sophus Bugge, *Helgedigtene*.

²⁷ Lib. III., c. 3.

tongue, because of its unified structure, stands very close to the historical romance. What the sagas tell of the Norwegian ancestors of their heroes is, as a rule, unhistorical. Where the action takes place in foreign lands it is generally an invention. Dress and weapons in the sagas belong to the end of the twelfth century. Sigurðr Sýr, when he receives his stepson, St. Olaf, is dressed as a knight of the time of Snorre. The chieftain Arinbjorn presents to the poet Egil Skallagrimsson a complete suit of English cloth and gives him long, elaborate silk sleeves to be fastened to the coat with golden buttons, and this about the year 950 when no English cloth-industry existed. Egil expresses his thanks for these sleeves, in a verse. This fashion, as Alwin Schultz²⁸ explains, was not introduced before the second half of the eleventh century.

Where a saga is fiction we find the epic laws established by Axel Olrik²⁹ prevailing. For instance, the "law of the number three" applies. On the third day the queen of Novgorod finds Olaf Tryggvason; the Hallgerd of the *Njála* is thrice married and receives a blow on the cheek from each of her three husbands. In these laws we possess an excellent method of deciding whether or not, and in what parts, a saga is the result of poetic invention.

Oral saga-narration originated between 950 and 1000 in the Viking settlements on the British Isles. During the next fifty years these sagas became known in Iceland as well as in Norway. Then the Icelanders in the second half of the eleventh century began to collect the oral traditions. The oral saga had its rise during this time in Iceland, to be written down eighty or a hundred years later.

Peculiar conditions are responsible for the creation of the art of the Icelandic saga: the peaceful life on that distant island in the midst of the ocean, far from the happenings which alter the course of history; remembrance of the forefathers who fought in Britain and Ireland and who were great chieftains in Norway; the duty of the chieftain to know his ancestral lineage; the relatively great prosperity still prevailing after Viking times, but subsequently offset by economic distress; the long winter evenings in the chieftain's hall or the light summer nights at the Althing.

Three times has the poetry of the Norwegian-Icelandic race conquered the world: by means of the Eddic songs, the Icelandic sagas, and the writings of Ibsen and Björnson. Between these lead paths which the investigator must follow.

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²⁸ *Höfisches Leben zur Zeit der Minnesänger.*

²⁹ On the Epic Laws Dr. Axel Olrik gave a lecture at the Historical Congress of Berlin.